

Vilnius: Government by Adrenalin

Music Teachers, Film Stars and Students Are Learning as They Rule

By Esther Schrader

VILNIUS, Lithuania—Inside the building that houses the breakaway government of Lithuania, the republic's president formulates foreign policy on the advice of a linguist and the prime minister drops letters to Western leaders with the help of a journalist-friend who knows English.

In an office down the hall, the government's makeshift information bureau sends out messages to the world by fax machine, and a Lithuanian journalist recently hired by the government as a "foreign affairs specialist" explains that his only qualification for the job is his many trips to Sweden.

For all the courage the Vilnius government has shown to the outside world in the past month, the leaders of Lithuania these days are amateurs—and it shows. They are, for the most part, a band of intellectuals who moved into the halls of communist power here in something of a peaceful palace coup. By their own acknowledgment, they are improvising from day to day, enlisting the financial and moral support of Lithuanians in the West one moment, and pleading with foreign journalists to cover their peaceful revolution in the best light the next.

"One year ago, I had not the money to

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go from Kaunas to Vilnius," said Emanuelis Zingeris, a university professor who is now a member of the republic's legislature. He was cradling a portable phone one recent evening and viewing the black car awaiting him outside the window of his new office with amazement. "It is incredible. I feel we are making this up as we go along. It is a revolution. We are all outsiders. We came in from the street."

To observe the government here over a period of seven weeks, as I have done, is to be impressed with the courage of this tiny nation and of its inexperienced government for taking on a superpower. But it is also to observe a neophyte leadership that is not without a certain element of the absurd—as if the radical student union in some college town had taken over the university administration building and installed their favorite music teacher as president.

It is no wonder. The president of Lithuania is a music professor. The foreign relations commission is chaired by a linguist. A weekly newspaper editor is the deputy prime minister, and a Lithuanian film star sits on the secretariat of the parliament.

The Lithuanian government is studded with poets, philosophy professors, astronomers and historians. They are mainly former dissidents whose chief political experience consisted of struggling in secret for years for Lithuanian independence. They were locked out of participation in mainstream politics because they are not Communist Party members.

For an official information bureau, the Vilnius government has a crew of young people from abroad who volunteer long hours every day—running on adrenalin, patriotism and little else. They are mostly university students with no experience at all in what they are doing. They serve as official interpreters at news conferences, translate government documents, act as personal secretaries for government leaders and send the republic's statements by fax and telex to foreign news organizations. They bring to the office they have made their own the dedicated and somewhat self-righteous atmosphere of a college newspaper, complete with political cartoons tacked to the wall and a wager sheet for placing bets on "when the tanks will come."

All of which means the Vilnius government is a body long on determination to defy Moscow and short on the experience to negotiate with the Kremlin and run its republic at the same time.

In its first week in power, the new Lithuanian government passed an ambitious series of laws designed to secure Lithuania's borders and resources, to take its legal system for its own and to help protect Lithuanian deserters from the Soviet Army. Its leaders abolished the Soviet constitution in their territory, declared the borders of the republic its own and drafted legislation to overhaul the economic system, institute a free-market economy and reinstate the currency of the old Lithuanian republic.

Since then, however, the republic's parliament has passed no legislation at all to

put those declarations into effect. The Lithuanian economy is still run from Moscow, the republic's borders remain under Soviet control and not one country has recognized Lithuania as a sovereign nation.

The Lithuanian Foreign Ministry rather gleefully made a show of issuing visas from the "Republic of Lithuania" to foreign journalists here, and invited several U.S. senators to come to Lithuania even after Moscow closed the republic to foreigners. In the end, however, the only journalist who took up the Lithuanians' offer was expelled by Soviet authorities. And not even a personal escort by the republic's new foreign minister could get the senators past the Soviet border guards.

The only defense the Lithuanian government has against the occupation of prominent buildings in Vilnius by armed soldiers loyal to Moscow is an unarmed volunteer patrol whose members wear green armbands and stake out corners of the buildings for their own. And the government's only counter to the war of nerves launched by Moscow is its daily news conferences, where it pulls a few information maneuvers of its own.

To that end, Lithuanian President Vytautas Landsbergis addresses the press here every evening without fail. He answers questions with rambling monologues about the latest rumor of military activity in the republic and stresses daily that there is virtually nothing his government can do to prevent a crack-down by Moscow.

The conferences were intended initially for the hundreds of foreign journalists who poured into this small capital city last month chasing reports of wide-scale Soviet military activities here. But at the beginning of April, the Soviet Foreign

Ministry ordered all accredited Moscow correspondents back to their home offices and refused to issue any more visas to journalists to enter Lithuania. Thus the Vilnius government lost its main line of defense.

These days, the foreign press corps gathered here is a crew as motley as the government itself. It includes a few freelancers from Great Britain and the United States, some photographers sneaking around without visas and a pair from National Geographic magazine who usually sit out the news conferences altogether.

All of this is not to belittle the Vilnius leaders. What they have accomplished here is no small feat. The government has not only taken radical steps towards freedom but has at the same time managed to retain the support of the majority of the republic's people. It has defiantly refused—under tremendous psychological pressure from Moscow—to revoke its March 11 declaration of independence.

The fact remains, however, that the most visible changes in the government headquarters here are symbolic—the tricolor of the old republic that has replaced the hammer and sickle in the parliament hall, the knight on horseback installed below it as the Lithuanian coat of arms and the letter-envelope that reads "Republic of Lithuania" sold at a kiosk in the lobby.

So the Vilnius government makes it through each day, learning as it goes along and never knowing what will happen to it next.

"We are going through a fjord at night, a long and unknown river," said Algimantas Cekoilis, a leader of Sajudis—the pro-independence movement that brought the government here to power. "We are just feeling our way, we cannot go back. The river is unknown. We don't even know how wide it is or where it leads."